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ABSTRACT

Between 1992 and 1995, 2,117 nonmanagerial employers in 31 public and private sector organizations throughout the United Kingdom were interviewed for the following purposes: analyzing the need for training and development (T&D); obtaining feedback on existing training provision; identifying barriers to T&D that might affect individuals' ability to participate in training and adapt to change; and establishing a partnership approach to the T&D of nonmanagerial employees. Many of those interviewed saw a need for additional training in the following areas: written skills (44%); oral skills (26%); math skills (22%), and computer skills (39%). A majority of interviewees stated that their training had been limited and that, although training opportunities were improving somewhat, many difficulties and barriers to training remained. Among the other concerns/problems identified were the following: poor initial introduction to the job and inadequate on-the-job training; no tradition of training; low expectations by management of employees' capabilities; poor communication skills because of poor experiences at school and deterioration of skills through lack of use; and lack of confidence in ability to cope in learning situation. The interview findings were examined in the broader context of the challenge of providing training in an atmosphere of increasing competition. (Contains 10 references.) (MN)

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ED 399 421

The evolving role of the non-managerial workforce

This Report was written by Nickie Fonda, The Prospect Centre, December 1995.

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Introduction

Since 1980, Workbase Training has worked in a wide variety of organisations, talking to employees and carrying out training programmes involving about 20,000 non-managerial employees in the private, public and health sectors. Its unique approach involves a partnership approach and strong support from the CBI, LGMB, TUC and other unions. In its work, Workbase Training aims to:

- Enhance the education, training and development of non-managerial employees in order to achieve a competitive and highly skilled workforce;
- Ensure that development and training opportunities are available for these staff and that the barriers which prevent full participation in development and training opportunities are highlighted, understood and taken into account, especially when introducing and implementing change;
- Build up employees' confidence so that they can adapt to change;
- After fifteen years of experience, Workbase Training felt that the time had come to review and consider the broader policy implications of its work, in the context of developments in the roles of the non-managerial workforce which the coming few years might bring.

As a result, during the summer of 1995, Workbase Training commissioned a forward look at the changing roles and responsibilities of the non-managerial workforce. This included a review of the recent experiences of Workbase from 1992 to 1995.

Summary of Findings from the Workbase Training Review

1. Background

Between 1992 and 1995, Workbase Training interviewed 2,117 non-managerial employees in 31 organisations, for the purposes of:

- analysing the need for training and development in relation to individual needs, organisational requirements and objectives, noting the particular need for improved communication skills;
- obtaining feedback on existing training provision that the employees felt was necessary to meet existing and future demands in relation to their jobs;
- identifying barriers to training and development that might affect their ability to participate and adapt to change;
- establishing a partnership approach to the training and development of non-managerial employees.

The 31 organisations comprised 13 in the private sector, 9 in the public sector and 9 in health.

The organisations covered by the review were undergoing considerable change and re-structuring:

- reorganisation was reducing hierarchical structures and introducing new working practices for shopfloor employees which gave them new duties and responsibilities;
- redundancy programmes included amalgamating and relocating a number of production units, requiring the remaining staff to become multi-skilled and flexible;
- the introduction of new technology demanded a wide range of skills, reorganisation of familiar structures and flexibility;
- in the public services, the impact of government legislation was leading to changed job roles and demand for greater flexibility and multi-skilling;
- S/NVQ programmes and internal competence standards were requiring employees to use skills they had not practised for many years.

Many of the employees interviewed were apprehensive about how the re-organisation and the new demands would impact upon their jobs, and whether they would have the skills to perform effectively. However, despite their feelings of uncertainty, the majority were committed to their jobs, were providing a high quality of service and felt they were making a worthwhile contribution to their organisations.

2. *Employees' areas of concern*

The interviews showed that non-managerial employees are concerned about a number of areas regarding their training and development:

Basic Work Skill Development Needs:

- 44% saw a need to improve their written skills; many considered that there had been little demand for written skills in the past. However, they were aware of the growing demand for these skills.
- 26% saw a need to improve their oral skills; employees lacked confidence in participating in team meetings, in contact with customers and clients, in making presentations, in many cases in talking to managerial levels;
- 22% wanted to improve their maths skills; many employees who had to use maths as part of their job lacked confidence and felt threatened when number skills were mentioned;
- 39% mentioned computer skills training when they were questioned as to personal development needs; they considered this an essential skill for the future.

Perceptions of Training

The majority of those interviewed felt that the training they had received had been limited. There was some indication that training opportunities were improving, but many difficulties and barriers remained.

Poor initial introduction to the job and inadequate on-the-job training

Employees were critical of those areas because it was often left to experienced colleagues who were not always the best trainers and often had limited time to complete the task. The training was not always structured, which meant that standards were inconsistent and 'bad habits' were passed on. There seemed to be little evaluation of the training and the performance standards achieved.

"Somebody should check what I know and don't know. There is an assumption that you know things. Nobody knows the standards that should be achieved."

No tradition of training

After on-the-job training, little further development was considered to be available. This is changing, but Workbase Training's experience suggests that non-managerial employees still feel neglected in the allocation of training budgets.

These employees reported that they have received limited training opportunities for many years. They are feeling insecure and uncertain, which makes them apprehensive of and, in some cases, distrustful about new training initiatives.

Low expectations by management of employees' capabilities

Many employees felt that training was not considered necessary or essential for them. This was linked to feeling undervalued and having the perception that their contributions and skills were not recognised.

Although hierarchical structures are being broken down, there was some indication that employees still feel that there is a 'them' and 'us' situation. This is demonstrated in their perceptions that training programmes:

- are not accessible to them; little information available; not always passed on; not seen as being applicable to them;
- are not seen as necessary for them because they are often withdrawn for a variety of reasons, e.g. needed to cover, subject not job-related;
- time allowed/given is limited, which makes the training appear rushed and gives little time for them to digest. This limited time is often compared unfavourably with time and budget spent on management training, which enforces their feeling that their development is not important.

Poor communication skills often linked with:

- poor experiences at school. Some employees were made to feel failures, which often resulted in low educational achievements;
- deterioration of these skills through lack of use. Many jobs in the past have not demanded these skills;

- lack of confidence, especially in written skills, making employees self-conscious and unwilling to place themselves in positions where they may be required to write – such as taking up new job responsibilities and attending training courses;
- reluctance to take part in training programmes, often due to past training experiences where they were placed in embarrassing situations and trainers showed little understanding of their communication difficulties.

Lack of confidence in their ability to cope in a learning situation

Because of this, employees were often reluctant to take up opportunities or participate in initiatives such as S/NVQ programmes.

Maurice Rudge from Bristol Contract Services received an award after participating in Workbase programmes

Implications of These Findings:

A Look to the Future

It is clear from the results of this review that the roles of non-managerial employees are changing in many organisations in all sectors. It is also clear that many staff require considerable support if they are to develop the confidence and basic work skills to play their part.

It is also likely that the role changes which Workbase Training has seen are not unique to the 31 organisations in which it has worked over the past three years. The business changes which have been seen – reduction in hierarchies, the amalgamation and relocation of production units, introduction of new technology, government legislation and new competence standards – are a major part of the reality of a large number of firms and public services.

But are these changes merely a response to the recession of the early '90s, and to the initiatives of the UK's current government? Or are they symptoms of deeper and broader trends and development which are leading towards even further change in the roles and responsibilities of front-line staff?

The answers to these questions are critical for policy. If Workbase Training's review has highlighted a short-term, albeit major and important, set of needs, that implies one set of responses. If, however, the findings should also be seen in the context of longer-term historical trends, these findings may need to be seen in an altogether different light.

The Broader Context

To understand whether the changes Workbase Training has seen in the early '90s are symptoms of broader and deeper trends and developments, it is necessary to step back from today's workplaces, and to consider the challenges for our businesses which are arising from the broader business environment.

The Competitive Challenge

For companies, the broad strategic challenge has been crisply summarised by the Department of Trade and Industry in its 1994 Competitiveness White Paper:

> "Our companies face the most competitive environment they have ever seen. Barriers to the movement of goods and services continue to fall, many emerging nations are achieving rapid growth, and advances in technology are opening new markets and transforming existing industries.
>
> For a firm, competitiveness is the ability to produce the right goods and services at the right quality, at the right price, at the right time. It means meeting customers' needs more efficiently and more effectively than other firms."

Public services too are feeling a similar set of pressures, which might be summarised as:

> "Our public services face the most challenging environment they have ever seen. Both public needs and pressures on costs continue to rise, legislation and regulation are transforming traditional services, and public trust and goodwill are ebbing away.
>
> For a public service, competitiveness is the ability to deliver satisfying services to citizens at the right quality, at the right price, at the right time. It means continuous improvement in efficiency and effectiveness in responding to citizens' needs."

It is now widely acknowledged that the developed West has entered a period of slow growth, unprecedented international competition and technological change that has shifted the balance of power from those who work towards those who hold the purse-strings – customers and shareholders in the private sector, government and tax-payers in the public sector.

For many businesses, in both our private and public services, this shift has produced an urgent imperative to rationalise, to reduce costs and to increase the flexibility of their organisations' response to changes in demand.

Thus, businesses have been shedding jobs, automating work, multi-skilling, removing levels of management, increasing their use of part-time and temporary workers, moving production to cheaper locations, and out-sourcing a growing number of activities.

From Cost-Cutting to Value-Added

As many observers have noted, however, cost-cutting in our present business environment does not by itself guarantee business survival and profitability, let alone growth, or the trust and goodwill of tax-payers.

When customers have choices, and when technological advances and internationalisation are opening the market to new competitors, business managers are realising that they must be concerned with more than the cost and timeliness of goods and services. The real imperative to attract and keep customers makes a value-added perspective a necessity.

A value-added perspective starts with customers' needs, expectations and aspirations, and buying behaviour. It seeks, to use a rather over-blown phrase, "to delight the customer" while at the same time producing a satisfactory return for shareholders or, in the case of public services, the government. Many of the UK's household-name companies have shown signs of this perspective in their recent corporate business decisions, e.g. Marks & Spencer with its 'outstanding value' initiative; Midland Bank with the establishment of its First Direct telephone banking service; Daewoo with its revolution in car buying. A growing number of other businesses, often less well-known to the public, are pursuing a similar path.

What business managers are discovering, of course, is that adding value is a moving goalpost, as competitors improve their offerings, and customer expectations rise.

A 'Paradigm Shift' in Business Management Thinking

This search for added value is leading more and more business managers to a fundamental re-appraisal of the sources of continuing survival and competitiveness of their businesses. The argument goes:

It is no longer enough to be concerned solely with volume and margin improvements. If we are to compete, we must be seen by our customers to add more value than our competitors do. So all of our work must be directed to delivering today's promises to customers and to competitively enhancing the promises we can make to customers tomorrow. Therefore, we must strive to:

- do things right
- achieve results
- contribute to our customers' performance
- create new cost-effective value for our customers.

But it is people, and the way we organise work, and not our technology, that we must fundamentally rely on for this. It is people at all levels who have customers, suppliers and business partners, and who are at the core of our continuing success.

Consequences of the Paradigm Shift

The logic of this argument is now starting to reach the heart of the way our businesses are organised, managed and led. For example:

- Partnerships:

In the search for competitiveness through added-value, a growing feature of the business scene are joint ventures, strategic alliances, partnership sourcing and other forms of partnership between businesses to add 'collaborative advantage' to their pool of corporate assets.

As the view grows that everyone who works for the business has customers and suppliers, so this concept is also being extended to relationships with the workforce.

But making these partnerships work requires a good deal more than finding suitable partners and 'doing the deal'. Success, it seems, usually relies on the quality of the relationship which the partners are able to build. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter recently noted:

"Our research uncovered three fundamental aspects of successful business alliances:

- They must yield benefits for the partners, but they are more than just a deal...
- Alliances that both partners ultimately deem successful involve collaboration (creating new value together) rather than mere exchange (getting something back for what you put in)...
- They cannot be 'controlled' by formal systems, but require a dense web of interpersonal connections and internal infrastructures that enhance learning."

In transferring these conclusions to the workforce, Waterman and colleagues commented in a recent Harvard Business Review article:

> "A new relationship must be established between the organisation and its employees. The traditional parent-child relationship must give way to an adult-adult relationship, and this applies to the organisation's way of dealing with all employees, not just those in the fast track."

- Business planning:

Traditionally, most business planning has focused on sales, costs, profits and financial investments.

A spate of recent studies and reports, however, suggest that businesses with a value-added perspective are moving away from this single-minded preoccupation with financial targets towards more balanced corporate scorecards designed to "motivate breakthrough improvements in such critical areas as product, process, customer and market development"

(Kaplan and Norton)

They are embracing a wider set of goals around purposes, values, ways of working and learning, and they are increasingly reflecting the interests of multiple stakeholders. As the RSA recently concluded in its Tomorrow's Company Report:

> "The companies which will sustain competitive success in the future are those which focus less exclusively on financial measures of success – and instead include all their stakeholder relationships, and a broader range of measurements, in the way they think and talk about their purpose and performance."

- Change management:

> "For change to occur in any organisation, each individual must think, feel or do something different. Even in large organisations... leaders must win their followers one by one. Think of this as 25,000 people having conversion experiences and ending up at a predetermined place at approximately the same time. Small wonder that corporate change is such a difficult and frustrating item on every company's agenda."
>
> (Jeannie Daniel Duck)

Business managers are discovering that making fundamental changes in how business is conducted, in order to cope with the new competitive environment, requires profoundly different skills to those used for managing operational work. Without these skills, the cost of wasted effort, and the failure to achieve the desired benefits, is literally becoming life-threatening to businesses.

In developing their human resources and organisation strategies, therefore, excellence in change management is coming to be seen as another critical competitive asset, and a key strategic goal.

Everyone a business manager:

> "Every job demands a very high level of individual responsibility, as we no longer have a hierarchy of people waiting to be told what to do. In addition to being given responsibility for planning and organising their own work, all employees must take responsibility for what happens in the area they look after."
>
> (Mark Chitty, Business Services Manager, Brunner Mond)

Business managers' aspirations are rising about the contributions to be expected from people further and further 'down the line'. Indeed, 'the line' is now often being replaced by self-managing teams.

As front-line staff are seen less and less as 'factors of production' or 'appendages to the machine', they are increasingly being expected to take on roles which, in the past, were reserved for managers and professionals:

- customer services managers
- work process managers
- team leaders and members
- business analysts
- project managers
- change managers
- communicators.

Moreover, senior managers are increasingly recognising that they must not only rely on employees in these roles to 'do things right' and 'achieve results', but also to take responsibility for seeking out opportunities and responding to customers' needs. For this, as numerous commentators have observed, they need a workforce that has embraced corporate values and missions, can engage in dialogue to assess new information and experience, and develop appropriate responses.

- New views of competence:

In the old days, a good employee was one who turned up on time, did what he or she was told, and "left their brains in the car park." Productivity was seen to be merely a consequence of the way tasks were structured and supervised. Competence often equated to the ability to carry out tasks to experienced worker standards.

However, a 1995 survey of 123 large organisations by Competency magazine highlights a change in this perspective. Over 66% of respondents favoured a view of competence based on the "behaviours or traits of high achievers and the qualities required for business success." The behaviours most commonly cited by the responding organisations included:

- achievement drive/results orientation
- customer focus
- influencing skills
- communication
- business/commercial awareness
- change orientation
- team work.

The magazine remarked that:

> "S/NVQ and MCI standards are being introduced for front-line operational and sales staff, while behavioural frameworks tend to be favoured for managerial, specialist and professional groups...
>
> S/NVQ/MCI-derived competences are often a means of introducing a bottom-up approach to raising basic skills or meeting legislative requirements... Behaviourally-based competencies are being used to cascade downwards new corporate cultures focusing on improved performance, change and adaptability."

Where managers and professionals go today, the rest of the workforce can be expected to follow tomorrow.

Employability:

The logic of this paradigm shift, and its consequences, should not be taken to imply that employment security will follow. The business environment is too turbulent and uncertain for that, but what can be expected is the offer of 'employability' – added-value to the employee – if, and probably when, circumstances change.

"What matters now", wrote Waterman et al. in their seminal Harvard Business Review article, "Is having the competitive skills required to find work when we need it, wherever we can find it... How can an enterprise build capabilities, forge empowered teams, develop a deep understanding of its customers, and – most important – create a sense of community or common purpose unless it has a relationship with

its employees based on mutual trust and caring?... The answer is by entering into a new covenant under which the employer and employee share responsibility for maintaining – even enhancing – the individual's employability inside and outside the company.

It is the company's responsibility to provide employees with the tools, the open environment, and the opportunities for assessing and developing their skills. And it is the responsibility of managers at all levels to show that they care about their employees whether or not they stay with the company.

For each individual, this means staying knowledgeable about market trends, and understanding the skills and behaviours the company will need down the road. It means being aware of one's own skills... and having a plan for enhancing one's performance and longer-term employability. It means having the willingness and ability to respond quickly and flexibly to changing business needs. And it means moving on when a win-win relationship is no longer possible."

Some Broader Implications of Workbase Training's Findings

If this paradigm shift is indeed the direction in which business is being compelled to move, then the findings of Workbase Training's review can be seen as more than a consequence of the particular economic and political situation of the early part of this decade. In fact, these findings stand as a 'marker' of the present situation with regard to this fundamental reappraisal of organisations, and we can conclude:

- the expectations of business managers are rising about the contributions to be expected of the non-managerial workforce, particularly with regard to 'doing the right thing' and 'achieving results'
- much greater attention will need to be paid to induction and on-the-job training, if the expectation must be that the non-managerial workforce will 'do the right thing' and 'achieve results'
- but there is little indication that front-line staff see themselves yet as expected to 'contribute to their customers' performance' or to 'create new cost-effective value for their customers'

Traditional hierarchical organisations were often designed for mass production and control, and not for adding value. In the new paradigm, organisations are being re-designed to reflect the real 'value chains' in a business. Traditional management jobs are being replaced by self-managing business teams.

Responsibilities for 'doing things right' and 'achieving results' are being devolved further and further into the organisation. In addition, individuals and teams are expected to see themselves as having customers, suppliers and business partners in their own right. They are increasingly being expected to take responsibility for responding to customers' needs and for improving their value to customers.

Because front-line staff are seen less and less as 'factors of production' or 'appendages to the machine', they are increasingly being expected to take on roles which, in the past, were reserved for managers and professionals:

- customer service managers
- work process managers
- team leaders
- business analysts
- project managers
- change managers
- communicators.

As numerous commentators have observed, these roles and responsibilities require a workforce that has embraced corporate values and missions, can engage in dialogue to assess new information and experience, and develop appropriate responses.

Change Management and Business Planning:

There is a growing recognition amongst employers that new responsibilities require new confidence and skills, and a positive view of learning and training, and that good change management involves really listening to people, responding to what they say, and starting where people are.

Several aspects of good change management and value-adding business planning are notable by their absence:

- ensuring that people understand the need for change
- involving those affected in deciding the way forward
- ensuring that those affected have the understanding and skill to play their part
- ensuring that people feel valued

Employability:

The need for basic work skills can be expected to continue to grow significantly.

Higher levels of basic work skills are also likely to be increasingly called for because front-line staff do not yet seem to see themselves as expected to **'contribute to their customers' performance'** or to **'create new cost-effective value for their customers'.** This suggests that future change in roles is not yet consciously being anticipated.

As a result, future 'employability' is still a relatively under-developed concept.

Partnerships:

Front-line staff are still seen very much as 'junior' partners in delivering added-value and improvement, yet they are the people who do the 'real' work, often deal with customers at first hand, and frequently have leadership and management roles in other settings.

Some Broader Policy Consequences

The direction in which business management thinking is moving, coupled with the findings from Workbase Training, raises several important questions for action:

1. A New National Education and Training Target for the Workforce?

The UK's current National Targets for Education and Training to the year 2000 recognise the importance of communications, numeracy and IT skills for young people. As the Targets say:

> "75% of young people to achieve GNVQ Level 2 competence in communication and IT by 19, and 35% to achieve GNVQ Level 3 competence in these core skills by age 21".

Given the conclusions of this report, it is noteworthy that there is no Lifetime Learning Target for these basic work skills for the whole workforce.

Some may argue, of course, that there is an implicit target for basic skills in the Lifetime Learning Target which says "60% of the workforce to be qualified to S/NVQ level 3, Advanced GNVQ or 2 GCE A level standard" by the year 2000, since GNVQs include core skills. Even this, however, would still leave the possibility of a large section or the workforce lacking crucial basic skills.

In 1995, the National Commission on Education recommended a new Lifetime Target:

> "Over 90% of adults of working age will possess a defined basic level of competence in the use of English and mathematics".

These reports' findings will bear out the NCE's recommendation, and endorse their view that "it must be for the Government to define the results sought from the national education and training effort."

2. "Investors in Competitiveness"?

Investors in People embodies a recognition that people need to know what plans their business has and how they are expected to contribute.

It also embodies the understanding that people need to be supported in their development to achieve these contributions. However, it would appear that employers need an additional framework, an "Investors in Competitiveness" – one that focuses on business planning for competitiveness, good change management and the fostering of adult relationships – a further set of crucial underpinnings to sustained performance.

3. Benchmarking Change Management?

Much is known about how to manage change well and how to foster adult relationships. Business managers and their personnel managers clearly need access to this knowledge, to be able to benchmark their organisations, pursue improvement and monitor their progress. The approach to data-gathering used by Workbase Training clearly has a part to play in this process. Perhaps there is a new role for Workbase Training in the development of this process, as we move towards the Year 2000.

4. 'Professional' Associations for Front-Line Workers?

In maintaining and enhancing their employability, people who belong to professional bodies are likely to look to them for an independent viewpoint in anticipating changing roles, and to guide their continuing professional development. Professional bodies may also be seen as a source of opportunities to learn how to direct one's own career, to assess, plan for and meet personal development objectives. A key feature of professional bodies, of course, is that they are likely to involve their members in the formulation of views about the future.

Most people in front-line occupations have no professional body to look after their interests in these ways. Perhaps there is a role for partnerships between TECs, LECs, local groups of employers and trade unions which goes beyond S/NVQ and actively invites contributions from front-line staff themselves. If not, how else could front-line staff expect to make an input into the debate, and where else could they look for this type of support?

5. Learning to Be a Business Manager?

If people in front-line roles will increasingly be expected to play a full part in business development, as well as in achieving today's results, it could

reasonably be expected that, sooner rather than later, they will want to learn about business management. How can this best be done? Today, most training and development opportunities for this purpose are part of long-term management development processes in major companies which are both costly and limited to relatively few people. Perhaps there is a need to find out what opportunities already do exist, and to make good practice available through bodies such as Workbase Training, who clearly have the confidence of the front-line.

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